

Can

COVER STORY

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Russian President
Vladimir Putin at the
Kremlin last month

Russia: Friend, Enemy, or Frenemy?

With relations between the U.S. and Russia at their lowest point in decades, President Trump has called for improving ties. But can Russian President Vladimir Putin be trusted?

BY MICHAEL WINES

You couldn't dream up a more odd couple: On one side, the world's oldest democracy, leader of the West, and defender of liberty.

On the other, an authoritarian giant that recently invaded one of its biggest neighbors, ruthlessly suppresses its critics, and stands accused of meddling in the 2016 American presidential election.

The United States and Russia hardly appear made for each other. In fact, for most of the past 100 years, the two nations have teetered between mutual mistrust and planet-threatening nuclear confrontation.

Yet President Trump seems set on forgetting the past and making friends with Russia and its autocratic leader, Vladimir Putin. Trump has openly praised Putin on Twitter, calling him "highly respected" and "very smart." And some of Trump's public statements have been music to Moscow's ears: that Washington should stop lecturing other nations about human rights, for instance, and that America's commitment to defending European allies may not be ironclad.

Putin has returned the favor, calling Trump "very talented" and orchestrating a frenzy of praise for him in Russia's state-controlled media. All this mutual admiration has prompted a flurry of jokes on late-night TV about a budding



Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · Jan 7
Having a good relationship with Russia is a good thing, not a bad thing. Only "stupid" people, or fools, would think that it is bad!

President of Russia @KremlinRussia_E · 23 Dec 2016
On the first meeting with Trump: We will discuss how to put Russia-US relations back on track

"bromance" between the two leaders. In telephone calls after November's election, the two leaders quickly set an ambitious agenda for cooperation: on terrorism, Syria's civil war, Ukraine, Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programs, and the Arab-Israeli peace process (see *"The Six-Day War, Then & Now"* p. 18).

This is an incredible turn of events. In recent years, ties between the two nations have sunk so low that experts

have feared that any misunderstanding could trigger an international crisis—or worse. Trump's embrace of Putin could provide an opportunity to reset the U.S.-Russia relationship. But many analysts say the countries' fundamental interests are so at odds that it may be hard for the two strong-willed leaders to cooperate without butting heads (see *"the U.S. & Russia"*).

"Were they to actually pull off a reconciliation, it would enable cooperation in some very important areas and, even more critically, reduce tension that runs the risk of spiraling into a very dangerous situation for the world as a whole," says Olga Oliker of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. "However, I think the chances of a successful deal are low."

A History of Tensions

The U.S. and Russia have a long history of tensions (see *key dates*, p. 10). During the Cold War—a five-decades-long conflict between Soviet Communism and Western democracy—the two superpowers struggled for global supremacy and several times came close to outright war. In 1962, the Cuban missile crisis brought

The U.S. & Russia

Potential areas of cooperation

- **Counterterrorism:** Both the U.S. and Russia see ISIS and other terrorist groups as a major threat.
- **Halting North Korea's nuclear program:** The idea of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un having nuclear weapons is alarming to both countries.
- **Halting Iran's nuclear program:** Similarly, neither wants to see Iran and its religious leaders with nuclear weapons.
- **Resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict:** Ending the regional tensions created by this seven-decade-long conflict could benefit the U.S. and Russia.

Potential areas of conflict

- **Syria's civil war:** Russia is Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's strongest backer, while the U.S. supports moderate rebels in the conflict and wants Assad out.
- **Russia's involvement in Ukraine:** The U.S. imposed sanctions on Russia after its invasion of neighboring Ukraine and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.
- **NATO defense of European nations along Russia's border:** The U.S. has long been the leader of the 28-nation alliance that Russia increasingly sees as an adversary.
- **Russian interference in 2016 election:** U.S. intelligence agencies say Russia meddled in the 2016 presidential election.

the world to the brink of nuclear war.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, a new democratic Russia was born—and it looked briefly like the U.S. and Russia might finally become allies. But Russia—which before the 1917 Communist revolution had been ruled by autocratic czars for more than 350 years—had no experience with democracy. The mayhem of the transition period in the 1990s, when prices soared and the economy crashed, left many Russians impoverished and disillusioned with the idea of democracy. So when Putin came to power in 1999 promising security and prosperity, many Russians welcomed the idea of putting a new strongman in charge.

Since then, Putin has consolidated power and eliminated his opposition. Life for many Russians has improved, mostly because of global demand for oil from Russia's vast reserves. In many cities, a new middle class can sip Starbucks lattes, buy Gap jeans, and often speak without fear of reprisal.

But more than a few of Putin's serious critics and political rivals have been imprisoned under sketchy circumstances or even killed. A few years ago, Putin's crackdown included jailing members of an all-female punk band for singing anti-Putin songs. All the while, he's increasingly portrayed the U.S. as an enemy of renewed Russian greatness.

It didn't help that Putin and President Barack Obama didn't get along. Obama once said Putin looked "like a bored kid in the back of the classroom" during

meetings. In public, their body language made their dislike for each other obvious.

Growing Tensions

In 2014, the U.S. supported a revolution in Russia's neighbor Ukraine that overthrew a government backed by Russia. After Russia invaded Ukraine and seized the Crimean Peninsula, the U.S. imposed economic sanctions on Russia. Things went from bad to worse

when Russia sent troops, ships, and warplanes to Syria in 2015. They attacked anti-government rebels, whom the U.S. had been supporting, and bombed civilian areas in rebel territory. Russian involvement has helped turn the tide for

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in his civil war against the rebels, who are now on the defensive.

All this aggression has led many experts to conclude that relations between the U.S. and Russia are worse than they've been in decades. In fact,

some worry that a miscalculation on either side could spark a confrontation.

"We are now in a new Cold War that is more dangerous than the preceding one," says Stephen Cohen, a Russia scholar at Princeton University. "There are no rules of conduct. . . . We've got an exceedingly dangerous situation."

Enter President Trump, who has repeatedly promised to improve relations. Americans seem increasingly eager to do so: During Trump's campaign, polls showed a steady rise in American approval for Russia and Putin personally, especially among Trump's supporters. But many analysts think it's unlikely that this will translate into a sustained partnership.

"I'm not optimistic that the overlap of common interests with Russia is very big," says Michael McFaul, a Russia scholar at Stanford University in California. "Aside from the bumper sticker of fighting terrorism, there's not a lot of common agenda."

Consider the Israeli-Arab conflict, the Iran nuclear issue, and the Syrian civil



'We are now in a new Cold War that is [even] more dangerous.'

RUSSIA & THE U.S. KEY DATES

1917 Russian Revolution

After a revolution topples Czar Nicholas II, Vladimir Lenin establishes a Communist state that becomes the Soviet Union. As dictator, Lenin eliminates free elections and restricts freedoms.

1939-45 World War II

The U.S. and the Soviet Union are allies in the war against Nazi Germany. British, American, and Soviet leaders plan for postwar Europe at the Yalta Conference in 1945, but the spirit of cooperation breaks down quickly after the war.



At Yalta: (left-right) Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin

1947 Cold War

After the Soviet Union installs Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the U.S. pledges to protect all countries resisting Communism. This marks the start of a five-decades-long struggle between the democratic West and the Communist East.

The Hacking

What we know about Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 election

Last summer, in the heat of the U.S. presidential race, the website WikiLeaks dropped a bombshell. The site published thousands of private emails belonging to Democratic National Committee (DNC) officials. The emails embarrassed Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, who was then in a close contest with Republican Donald Trump.

How did WikiLeaks get the emails? U.S. intelligence agencies say Russian hackers broke into the DNC's computer network to access the emails, then shared them in an effort to influence the election.

According to the F.B.I., Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered

the hacking to increase Trump's chances of winning the presidency.

Why would Russia want Trump to win? Putin dislikes Clinton and clashed

with her when she was Secretary of State. "He had a clear preference for the person running against the person he hated so much," F.B.I. Director James Comey told congress.

Both Congress and the F.B.I. are now investigating the Russian hacking—and whether members of Trump's campaign staff played any role.

For his part, Trump has said that the hacks had "absolutely no effect on the outcome of the election." He has dismissed the entire controversy as "fake news." —Mary Kate Frank



military and intelligence agencies are hesitant to share information with Russian officials, who are more likely to see the U.S. as a target to be spied on than as an ally. The two sides might find a common position on Ukraine, where Trump has said he will consider lifting Obama's economic sanctions—but even there, he may find stiff resistance from Congress, which is far more skeptical of Russian intentions.

Bromance Over?

Any plans for closer ties to Russia have also become complicated by the fact that American intelligence agencies say Russia tried to meddle in the 2016 presidential election to favor Trump over Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton (see "The Hacking"). With Congress and the F.B.I. now investigating, Trump's Twitter comments about Russia have ebbed, as has his talk about cooperation. Russia's press has stopped singing Trump's praises.

Trump's chief Russia adviser, Fiona Hill, told *The Atlantic* magazine that a new era of cooperation with Moscow isn't in the cards.

"The Russians will get giddy with expectations," she said, "and then they'll be dashed, like five minutes into the relationship because the U.S. and Russia just have a very hard time . . . being on the same page."

If she's right, the bromance between Trump and Putin could be over almost before it gets started. •

Michael Wines is a reporter for *The New York Times*. He covered Russia from 1998 to 2003.

war—all cited as areas of potential cooperation in early telephone calls between Trump and Putin. Russia is an ally and arms supplier to Iran and Syria, which are both Israel's sworn enemies. Trump, meanwhile, is a staunch critic of Iran and an unwavering Israel supporter.

And perhaps most fundamentally, Trump and Putin find themselves on opposite sides of the NATO divide. The U.S. has long been the leader of the 28-nation military alliance dedicated to protecting the freedom of Western Europe. Russia has returned to its traditional role of seeing NATO as an adversary. Currently, NATO is moving troops and weaponry into four countries border-



Where's your shirt? The real Putin (left), who likes to be photographed shirtless; and the *Saturday Night Live* version.

ing Belarus, where Russia plans to conduct major military maneuvers this year.

The two nations do have common terrorist enemies, like ISIS, but American

1991

Soviet Collapse

After populist uprisings sweep away Communist regimes in much of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union disbands. An independent Russia chooses its first democratically elected president, Boris Yeltsin.

1999

Putin's Rise

Vladimir Putin, a former KGB agent, is appointed president when Yeltsin resigns. Putin is elected to the post in 2000. Over time, he consolidates power, jailing political opponents and limiting freedom of the press.

2014 A New Cold War?

Russia invades Ukraine and annexes the Crimean Peninsula. In response, the U.S. imposes economic sanctions. Relations between Putin and President Obama, already strained, deteriorate further.



Today

A Fresh Start?

President Trump has said he wants to improve U.S. relations with Russia. But the effort could be complicated by the investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election.